

## 211 nonemergency hotline to close at end of year

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The county's nonemergency 211 Hotline will close Jan. 1, another result of reduced funding during the recession.

Tim Williams, board president of the 211 SLO Hotline, passed the word to the organization's employees Thursday afternoon. "We're grieving," he said in an interview.

The hotline has existed for 40 years and became reachable by dialing 211 a little more than a year ago, when the local group received a permit from the Public Utilities Commission.

It is designed for nonemergency calls, an alternative to 911. "For emergencies, there's 911; for everything else, there's 211," its slogan said.

Some of those calls may now go back to emergency lines operated by police, the county Department of Social Services, hospitals and other care providers, Williams said.

He said the local group has fielded hundreds of thousands of calls in its 40 years, including 27,000 who have called 211 in the past year.

Callers range from those who simply "can't navigate the system" to distressed people on the verge of suicide. Suicide calls have spiked since the recession took hold, Williams said, reaching 130 per year and 17 last month.

Williams said volunteers will continue to work the hotline around the clock for the remainder of this year.

He hopes someone can pick up the slack. "We are trying to get crisis calls answered by another agency," Williams said.

The problem, Williams said, is acquiring sustained funding. He said many local businesses, Pacific Gas and Electric Co., some government agencies, nonprofit groups and others have helped, but these are hard times. He noted the irony of having less financial help available just at the moment when it is most needed.

The 211 movement swept the state a few years back, and most counties in Southern California have one activated. Williams said San Luis Obispo County is the first to announce that it is pulling out.

The local 211 SLO Hotline has a budget of \$240,000 and four full-time employees, all of whom have now lost their jobs, and a host of volunteers who staff phones countywide.